Nature Cycles Orienteering with Nature's Tools



Finding your way around a natural area like a park can be a fun and exciting adventure. Who knows what animals you might encounter? Or what you might find on the trail at your feet? Try tuning in to nature's cycles as a start. The most familiar to us is the cycle of the sun rising and falling, daylight and nightime. Much of our daily lives are built around this. Even clocks are divided into AM and PM, and hourly sections based on where the sun is in the sky.

At dawn, the sun lifts over the eastern horizon. As it rises, it follows a path up and across the southeastern portion of the sky. It reaches it's zenith (highest point in the sky) at mid-day, noon solar time. In winter, the sun is lower in the south; in summer, it's path is more directly above. In the afternoon, the sun moves across the southwestern sky, and finally sets more or less in the west at dusk.



Can you tell what time of day it is in this picture?

Try this: whenever you remember, look at your watch, and then check to see where the sun is in the sky. Look around you to see what the shadows look like, and what the quality of light is like. After practicing this for a while, you will be able to tell what time it is by the sun's position and it's light. You'll develop a sense of pace, so it's easier to plan your hikes - you'll know when to speed up to get back before the gate closes, and when you have time to find a quiet spot to sit and enjoy your surroundings.

Careful! Never look directly at the sun as it can harm your eyes.

Use the Sun as a Compass

Once you become familiar with the sun's cyclic path, you will find you can use it to navigate. As you hike along the trail, notice where the sun is and what the shadows look like. In your mind, you can begin to draw a map of the trail as you wind through the park.

But its Cloudy!

Telling time and navigating by the sun might be harder on cloudy days. But with practice, you can develop a sense of the quality of sunlight at different times of the day.



Sunset at Mount Jefferson State Park, North Carolina

Quick Quiz....

If you lived in the southern hemisphere, would the sun follow a more southerly path, or a northerly one?

Why does the sun rise at different times throughout the year?

Where is the sun at night time?

What are other cycles you can find in nature?

Why do we put North at the top of a map?

People navigate through their surroundings intuitively and with common sense. A stationary map based on this concept is oriented in the same direction as the person looking at it. (eg., if the person is facing south, south will be at the top of the map.) Putting north at the top is a way of standardizing hand held maps, but it also creates an artificial environment that can be confusing.

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